

CHRISTOLOGY IN FILM AND MUSICAL DRAMA

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Jesus of Nazareth is a sufficiently complex character that there is an entire field of academic study devoted to His identity: Christology. This makes Him exceedingly difficult to portray in fictionalised adaptations, not to mention His religious import to numerous audience members. Nevertheless, attempts have been made, and controversy inevitably ensued. But were these portrayals even Christologically heretical, as commonly alleged, or instead orthodox? To answer this, we shall consider Martin Scorsese's adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber & Sir Tim Rice's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Stephen Schwartz' *Godspell*, and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. All of these, except perhaps Gibson's, are typically accused of portraying Jesus as predominately, or even solely, human.

In order to evaluate these works' orthodoxy, we must first define what orthodox Christology even is. To over simplify, Christology may be understood as a spectrum of views regarding Christ. On one end is the heresy of Docetism, that Christ is fully divine and not at all human. On the other end is the heresy of Ebionism, that Christ is fully human and not at all divine. The orthodox position, as defined by the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, lies in the middle of the spectrum: that Christ is "united in one Person [*prosopon*] and subsistence [*hypostasis*]"¹ and that this "unity of Person...is to be understood as existing in both the natures",² with the two natures being "perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood".³ Where a work falls on this spectrum partially depends on how much emphasis is placed on Christ's humanity (leans towards Ebionism) or Christ's divinity (leans towards Docetism). To be orthodox, a work would balance the two natures in a way consistent with Chalcedon.

¹ Council of Chalcedon, 517

² Leo the Great, 505-6

³ Council of Chalcedon, 516

The Last Temptation of Christ (1988)

Broadly, Paul Schrader's *The Last Temptation of Christ* is about the conflict "between the spirit and the flesh",⁴ specifically within the person of Jesus Christ, and how this conflict causes Jesus to become Christ. This key central conflict is introduced in the Kazantzakis quote that opens the film. Jesus is portrayed as being fully human, having "done a lot of wrong things"⁵ (namely build crosses⁶), but has experienced God as "a viscous headache that would not go away"⁷ "[e]ver since he was a baby"⁸. The character oscillates between his humanity and divinity as "Two roads open up in front of [him]: the road of man, the road of God."⁹ To stop Jesus' death and resurrection from destroying the physical "kingdom of Satan"¹⁰, Satan tempts Jesus with a vision of fleshy domesticity¹¹ as "the last temptation was to be a real human being."¹² But, within the vision, Paul and Judas remind him of his purpose. Jesus then embraces the spiritual and messianic role of the crucifixion, allowing the vision to end and so return him to the cross.

This central conflict of the film, the flesh against the spirit inside Jesus such that "[t]he antagonist is God himself, who is in fact inside Jesus, or part of Jesus, or Jesus himself",¹³ corresponds quite well to Christ's two natures. The flesh of Christ would correspond to his humanity. The spirit of Christ would correspond to his divinity. As such, *Last Temptation* actually recognises that Christ has two natures and is interested in the relationship between them. How the film understands this relationship would then determine its orthodoxy. The most

⁴ Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, quoted in Scorsese, *The Last Temptation of Christ*

⁵ Schrader, 13

⁶ Scorsese, "Commentary"

⁷ Alternatively, the viewer may interpret this aspect of the film as Jesus the man being possessed by God, but that would seem to imply two persons in Christ, which is the heresy of Nestorianism. Schrader, "Commentary".

⁸ Schrader, 4

⁹ Schrader, 37

¹⁰ Schrader, 70

¹¹ Telford notes that the standard conservative criticism of the temptation is misguided "for it is not sex alone but *domesticity* in all its aspects which constitutes Jesus' last temptation". Telford, 136

¹² Scorsese, "Commentary"

¹³ Schrader, "Commentary"

common line of objection to *Last Temptation* is that it is Ebionist in its overemphasis on the physical human nature of Christ at the expense of the spiritual or Divine, with the most vocal adherents to this line tending to be Evangelical or Fundamentalist. Alternatively, one could argue that *Last Temptation* is Docetist or gnostic in its overemphasis on the spiritual at the expense of the physical.

The Ebionist line of objection to *Last Temptation* is based almost entirely on an early scene wherein Jesus confesses to an Essene monk. Martin Scorsese included this scene: “to make the association of Jesus as one of us, as a human being” and “if he could recognize these faults and these dangers in himself and then overcome them, then maybe we could [too].”¹⁴ However, that Jesus is “portrayed as a sinner”¹⁵ “who is racked by guilt for his own sins, as well as that of others”¹⁶ is “the true blasphemy of the movie”¹⁷ as it runs directly counter to the New Testament assertion that He was “without sin”¹⁸. Yet, this apparent contradiction with the Sacred Scripture need not completely derail the theology expressed in *Last Temptation*. Theologically, the scene could be read as extrapolating off of Mark’s description of Jesus’ baptism “for the remission of sins” (1:5-6, 9-11).¹⁹ Additionally, this could be seen as referencing Martin Luther’s idea of the “Happy Exchange”, wherein Christ was made “sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God”.²⁰ In this context, Christ could thus be seen as “a sinner...and of all sinners the greatest.”²¹ This reading is substantiated by Jesus’ empathy for others’ sin. Another possible explanation is that initially Jesus is unsure if God or demons possess him, and if it is

¹⁴ Scorsese, “Commentary”

¹⁵ Godawa, 180

¹⁶ Telford, 136

¹⁷ Godawa, 180

¹⁸ Heb 4:15

¹⁹ While this passage does raise interesting Christological questions, this is not the place for such exegesis. As such, we will let it suffice that the greatest theological minds of the past two millennia were not wrong and thus the filmmakers’ extrapolation is merely suspect, even if Biblically grounded. Telford, 136.

²⁰ 1 Cor 5:21

²¹ Luther, 136

demons then it must be as punishment for sin(s).²² Here, it is only Jesus' human nature that thinks he is a sinner. Likewise, from the stance of dramatic storytelling, the emphasis on Christ's human nature, and thus the human ability to sin, is necessary for the *temptation* of Christ to have any meaning.²³ Ultimately, Scorsese does not think this scene undermines Christ's divinity: "just because he's dealing with these doubts and this self-loathing at times, it doesn't mean that ultimately he's not able to fulfill the role of the redeemer...it's part of the process of being fully human and fully divine."²⁴ While the sinner angle may go too far in reminding the viewer of Christ's humanity, it need not necessarily be detrimental to the film as a whole.

In direct contrast to this emphasis on Christ's humanity, the film also places an emphasis on Christ's divinity. This may be seen in that the film does make explicit divine claims regarding Jesus, such as when Christ says "When I say, 'I,' Rabbi, I am saying 'God'"²⁵ and the description of the incarnation.²⁶ Additionally, the screenplay says that if Jesus were to reject the crucifixion he would "finally [be] free of God"²⁷, thus at the conclusion Christ accepts both the crucifixion and his divine nature. Furthermore, the presence of such explicit divine claims rules out an Arian and/or Adoptionist Christology, that is a "soft" Ebionism, wherein the Son of God is but a creature. The presence of an emphasis on both Christ's humanity and divinity suggests a balance affirming both natures.

This balance between Christ's two natures may be seen throughout the film. By way of example, in one scene Judas argues that "There's no freedom for the soul without freedom for the body", suggesting a flesh to spirit progression; however, Jesus counters, saying, "The soul is

²² Staley & Walsh, 109

²³ Deacy, 87

²⁴ Scorsese, "Commentary"

²⁵ Schrader, 56

²⁶ Schrader, 82

²⁷ Schrader, 79

first.”²⁸ Both directions are later balanced when Jesus says, “The road on which the mortal become immortal [theosis], God becomes human [incarnation].”²⁹ Another instance of this balance may be seen when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. When calling forth unto Lazarus, Jesus accepts his divinity by calling his “Father, the most Holy God”.³⁰ This divine claim is then undercut by an expression of doubt, “God help me”.³¹ This juxtaposition again suggests the two natures of Christ.

These developments towards balance are suggestive of the finale, wherein Jesus rejects the fleshy humanity offered by Satan and instead embraces his divine messianic mission, returning him to the cross. As such, “Jesus is divine from the get go in all the other movies”,³² but in *Last Temptation* he begins human. The film then follows his “evolving relationship with God the Father”³³ through “the process of being fully human and fully divine”³⁴ and how this works “to complete the divinity of Christ”.³⁵ The film is thus about the hypostatic union of Christ’s two natures, rather than one over the other, as expressed in narrative form.

Based on this resolution to the conflict, one could object to *Last Temptation*, saying that it is gnostic in its overemphasis on the spiritual at the expense of the physical. The Baptist’s discussion of two roads, noted earlier, would thus be an absolute dichotomy between humanity and divinity. Jesus would thus ultimately be choosing divinity and rejecting humanity at the film’s end, rather than uniting the two. However, these objections may be countered.

Last Temptation is not gnostic because it actually balances Christ’s divine and human natures, as noted above. Additionally, the stark dichotomy between flesh and spirit may be

²⁸ Schrader, 29

²⁹ Although, this line is absent from the final cut. Schrader, 82; cf Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54.3

³⁰ Schrader, 53

³¹ *ibid*

³² Dafoe, “Commentary”

³³ Schrader, “Commentary”

³⁴ Scorsese, “Commentary”

³⁵ Schrader, “Commentary”

undermined such that “Scorsese does not deny the value of the flesh in favour of the spirit (as some say Gnosticism would), but rather affirms the superiority of the spirit to the flesh (as Neo-Platonism and Christian orthodoxy do).”³⁶ This is because of the strength of the temptations, “the flesh has its appeal”³⁷. Finally, the latter part of *Last Temptation* has a heavy soteriological emphasis, wherein the reasons for the crucifixion are given: bringing about “the passage from death to eternal life”³⁸, that the only way to defeat death is to crucify the Son of God³⁹, and to affect the New Covenant⁴⁰. The soteriological reasons for the crucifixion are ultimately on behalf of the physical world. Furthermore, Soteriology is dependent on Christology, and Soteriology only works if the Christology is orthodox. The soteriological emphasis thus suggests the orthodox Christology of two natures in one person, especially as it is used as the reason for Jesus to return to the cross and so embrace his divinity. The finale is thus not an embrace of the spiritual over and above the physical, but rather an embrace of the hypostatic union of the two. The potentially gnostic implications of the ending are thus countered.

Having surveyed *The Last Temptation of Christ*, we may say that it is broadly orthodox in its Christology. It balances the human and divine natures of Christ, avoiding both Docetism and Ebionism in its presentation of Chalcedonian dyophysitism. As the film “thus fits comfortably into the Antiochene Christological formulation”⁴¹ it is “far more theologically acceptable than most filmic representations of the person of Christ.”⁴² Nevertheless, the film is not perfect in its Christology, but this is a limitation of the medium. There is the problematic suggestion that Christ could sin without clear clarification, such as only in his human nature. But such nuanced

³⁶ Staley & Walsh, 113

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ Schrader, 71

³⁹ Schrader, 91

⁴⁰ Schrader, 97

⁴¹ Deacy, 87

⁴² Deacy, 85

clarification of a hypothetical is exceeding difficult to do within the narrative form, let alone the essay. Likewise the placement of the hypostatic union at the crucifixion rather than the incarnation, which makes sense dramatically (it is the climax of the story and a film entirely within Mary's womb would be weird), is not theologically correct. Still, the filmmakers have made what is perhaps the most profound Christological statement possible within the medium.

Jesus Christ Superstar (1970)

Lord Andrew Lloyd Weber and Sir Tim Rice's rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* is a passion play⁴³ that focuses on the interplay between Jesus, Judas, and Mary Magdalene while considering themes of fatalism, interpretation, and irony. The opera presents "the story from the point of view of Judas Iscariot"⁴⁴, while not giving him the historical hero upgrade of *Last Temptation*. Judas is concerned that Jesus is starting to believe the folk-hero legends circulating about him, namely that's he's God⁴⁵, and so sees the whole situation as spiralling out of control towards a violent confrontation with the Romans. Judas ultimately teams up with the religious leaders, who ironically misinterpret messianic prophesy in political terms, to get rid of Jesus. Throughout, Jesus' identity is questioned. Jesus knows that he must be crucified as part of the divine plan and so goes along with the fated events. He is crucified and the opera ends with his burial.

Superstar comes across as less interested in presenting a developed Christology than *Last Temptation*, but is nevertheless still interested in the repeated refrain "Jesus Christ / Jesus Christ / Who are you?"⁴⁶ In the vein of *Evita*, multiple views as to who Jesus is are presented. Both

⁴³ The genre omits the resurrection because it is meant to be performed on Good Friday.

⁴⁴ Rice, "An Exclusive Interview with Master Lyricist Tim Rice"

⁴⁵ 'You've started to believe / The things they say of you / You really do believe / This talk of God is true' Rice, *Heaven on Their Minds*

⁴⁶ Rice, *Superstar*

Judas⁴⁷, the unreliable narrator, and Mary Magdalene⁴⁸ assert that “He’s a man / He’s just a man”. The opera presents “Jesus [as] seen through the eyes of Judas, and Judas didn’t believe he was God”⁴⁹. Despite this denial on the part of the characters, they do recognise “an intangible quality...that makes Jesus different”.⁵⁰ Rumours circulate that Jesus is God, prompting the crowds to ask him “Tell us that you are who they say you are”.⁵¹

Nevertheless, *Superstar* may still be said to present an Ebionist Christology. The opera places its emphasis on Christ’s humanity as “it was really Jesus as a man [Rice and Lloyd Webber] were interested in.”⁵² The goal of demythologization is presented in the opening number: “If you strip away / The Myth / From the man”.⁵³ Additionally, Jesus denies asserting divine sonship. During the trial Caiaphas inquires “You say you’re the son of God / in all your hand-outs / well is it true?” to which Jesus replies, “That’s what you say”.⁵⁴ While Jesus’ answer is Biblical,⁵⁵ the question has changed from “Are You then the Son of God?”⁵⁶ to “do you say that you’re the Son of God?” thereby yielding a different meaning. *Superstar* would thus not even be Adoptionist. Moreover, in Jesus’ soliloquy in Gethsemane he expresses ignorance as to why God plans for him to die via crucifixion: “Show me there’s a reason / For you wanting me to die / You’re far too keen on where and how / but not so hot on why”.⁵⁷ This ignorance returns before Pilate when Jesus sings “There may be a kingdom for me / Somewhere if I only knew”.⁵⁸

⁴⁷ Rice, *Judas’ Death*

⁴⁸ Rice, *I Don’t Know How to Love Him*

⁴⁹ Rice, “An Exclusive Interview with Master Lyricist Tim Rice”

⁵⁰ Staley & Walsh, 65

⁵¹ Rice, *This Jesus Must Die*

⁵² Rice, “An Exclusive Interview with Master Lyricist Tim Rice”

⁵³ Rice, *Heaven on Their Minds*

⁵⁴ Rice, *The Arrest*

⁵⁵ Matt 26:64, Luke 22:70

⁵⁶ Luke 22:70, cf Matt 26:63

⁵⁷ Rice, *Gethsemane (I Only Want to Say)*

⁵⁸ The film adaption changes the line to “Somewhere if you only knew”. Rice, *Trial Before Pilate (Including the 39 Lashes)*.

This causes Jesus to come across as a mere human with a special connection to God (a prophet) who does what God has fated him to do simply because God “hold[s] every card”.⁵⁹

Critics typically also point to the lack of miracles in *Superstar* as further evidence of an Ebionist Christology. However, *Superstar* itself raises this objection; when Jesus is brought before Herod, Herod sings “Prove to me that you’re divine / Change my water into wine / That’s all you need do / Then I’ll know it’s all true”.⁶⁰ The critic is thus forced to assume the faithless and flippant role of King Herod. Miracles are not necessary to prove divinity – the prophets of the Old Testament performed miracles and yet none use these as evidence for their divinity.

But could this emphasis on the human in *Superstar* not be overcome as it was in the case of *Last Temptation*? That this emphasis on humanity merely counters Docetism? Indeed, there are some hints at divinity, such as Christ referring to the Temple in Jerusalem as “My Temple”.⁶¹ Additionally, *Superstar* does use some soteriology, that the crucifixion is God’s will and that “To conquer death / You only have to die”.⁶² Moreover, since it is the crowds that say Christ is divine, his celebrity could be equated with the divine nature. Staley and Walsh, in their discussion of the film adaption, argue that *Superstar*

“struggle[s] with the dichotomy between Jesus the man...and Jesus the Christ/Savior figure, which ... becomes Jesus Christ “superstar” or Jesus the celebrity.... Despite Judas’s desire to burst the bubble of myth-making crowds and despite Mary Magdalene’s sensual love, the myth of “Jesus the celebrity” ultimately triumphs.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Rice, *Gethsemane (I Only Want to Say)*

⁶⁰ Rice, *Herod’s Song (Try It and See)*

⁶¹ Rice, *The Temple*

⁶² Rice, *Simon Zealotes/Poor Jerusalem*

⁶³ Staley & Walsh, 65

But this goes too far. Not enough effort is made by Rice and Lloyd Webber to balance the divine and human natures, or even equate celebrity with divinity. Indeed, their intent was not to balance the two, as Sir Tim Rice maintains “We wanted to bring out the human side of [Jesus] without making a statement one way or the other [regarding] his divinity. *Superstar* doesn’t say Jesus was God, it certainly doesn’t say he wasn’t....its up to you.”⁶⁴ But the emphasis on humanity coupled with a deëmphasis on the (vaguely) divine slides the scale towards Ebionism, which shows an interesting limitation of narrative ambiguity. Despite intentions, we are left with an Ebionist passion opera about a prophet while “it is *the people* who make a messiah out of a man”.⁶⁵

Godspell (1971)

Besides *Superstar*, Stephen Schwartz’ surrealist and vaudevillian *Godspell* presents the other musical Jesus of the seventies. This musical is much more interested in Christ’s teaching and parables while presenting devotion and praise to God. To this end, it is steeped in traditional Christian worship, drawing lyrics from mediæval hymns and poetry, as well as the Psalms. In the film adaption, a group of “average Joes” hear the call of John the Baptist out of the material concerns of Manhattan and so enter into the Kingdom of Heaven’s theatre troupe via Christ’s teaching, with Christ appearing separately as an otherworldly messenger. As such, its attention to Christology is peripheral and it even seems Docetist with its focus on worshiping God while vaguely following Christ’s life from his baptism to crucifixion.

By contrast, critics have instead focused on the absence of the resurrection and miracles, or what the musical is *not* about, to argue that it is Ebionist.⁶⁶ However, miracles are present in the form of vaudevillian magic tricks. Additionally, one of the teachings in the film is the parable

⁶⁴ Rice, “An Exclusive Interview with Master Lyricist Tim Rice”

⁶⁵ Godawa, 179

⁶⁶ Godawa, 179; Staley & Walsh, 70

of the rich man and Lazarus⁶⁷, the stated moral of which is that “if they don’t listen ta Moses and the prophets, they ain’t gonna listen ta nobody, even if somebody should rise from the dead!”⁶⁸ Likewise, if the audience ignores the Biblical teachings of Christ found in *Godspell*, a resurrection scene is not going to make a difference. To demand a resurrection scene is to assume the role of the damned rich man.

So what is the Christology of *Godspell*? Let us look more closely. Early in the musical, Jesus asks of God “When wilt thou save the people?”⁶⁹ We may thus assume that there is some level of distinction between the two. Yet, Jesus explicitly equates himself with God when he sings “I send you prophets, I send you preachers.”⁷⁰ This distinction yet equation also returns during the crucifixion scene. From the cross, Jesus cries out “Oh God, I’m bleeding”;⁷¹ God is therefore another. The chorus then responds, “Oh God, you’re bleeding”⁷² – either an exclamation or saying that “God is bleeding”; if the later then, per the exchange of predicates, Christ is God. By putting these together, *Godspell* says that Christ is God and yet distinct from God. This is technically orthodox despite being exceedingly vague while also ignoring his humanity. There is some further clarification in the middle of the musical, wherein Gibbon sings to Jesus “Thine inner God...”, suggesting some sort of incarnation. The phrase is vague enough to suggest Apollinarianism, that Christ’s soul is the *Logos*, but that may be reading too much into three words. Finally, the film adaption includes Christ’s temptation from Matthew 4:1-11, but as part of the Agony in the Garden. Here Satan tempts Jesus saying, “If you are the Son of God...”

⁶⁷ Luke 16:19-31

⁶⁸ Greene, cf Luke 16:31

⁶⁹ Schwartz, *Save the People*

⁷⁰ Schwartz, *Alas for You*

⁷¹ Schwartz, *Finale*

⁷² *ibid*

but is met by Christ's rebuke "You shall not tempt the Lord your God."⁷³ Jesus thus asserts a divine claim while, as we saw in *Last Temptation*, implying a human nature that can be tempted.

The five or so phrases related to Christology within *Godspell* are thus balanced between Jesus' equality with God and distinction therefrom, with only some suggestion of humanity, via incarnation and temptation. Despite not being the exemplar of Christological orthodoxy, to declare it heretical would be to read too much into it.

The Passion of the Christ (2004)

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is another passion play style work, focusing roughly on the last twelve hours of Christ's life. With its almost overly dramatic emotion, it is meant to become an object of religious devotion, an icon, for the meditative contemplation on the love and suffering, *id est* the passion, of Christ.

Other works depicted an internal confusion or ignorance in Jesus regarding the crucifixion, using this to either emphasise his humanity (*Superstar*) or comment on the distinction between his two natures (*Last Temptation*). In *The Passion* no such puzzlement is shown in Jesus, as he proceeds with divine omnipotence and purpose towards his goal. Throughout, Jesus asserts his divine claims, telling Caiaphas "I AM...and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of power"⁷⁴ and referring to God as "Abba". But the passion is not Docetist in its Christology. The excruciating focus on the physical torment and torture does underscore Christ's humanity. As too does his maternal connection to Mary. There is thus a balance struck, as in *Last Temptation*, between the two natures. However, the distinction between the two is underemphasised (if it is overemphasised by Scorsese), thus suggesting the film is perhaps closer to miaphysitism than dyophysitism.

⁷³ Matt 4:3, 6, 7

⁷⁴ Gibson, cf Dan 7:12-4, Matt 26:64, Mark 14:62

Conclusion

Having considered the works in detail, we may return to our original question: are these portrayals Christologically heretical or orthodox? *Last Temptation* does its best to present Chalcedonian dyophysitism, despite its own shortcomings – it may thus be deemed orthodox. *Superstar* presents Jesus as a human prophet “seen through the eyes of Judas”⁷⁵ – it may thus fall under the heresy of Ebionism, despite intentions. *Godspell* presents Christ as God incarnate yet distinct from God – it may thus be deemed orthodox. *Passion* emphasises the unity of the human and divine elements – it may thus be deemed orthodox.⁷⁶ The controversy surrounding these works, as well as their shortcomings, reveals a great deal of confusion amongst moderns as to what orthodox Christology even is. Most criticism seems to be that the works in question are Ebionist, while ignoring any suggestion of Docetism (or even Gnosticism). Such criticism reveals the self-proclaimed guardians of Christian culture’s own cursory reading of the texts and ignorance of Christology. It thus appears that Docetism is such a blind spot that the heresy may well have again taken root. Diagnosing the cause of this problem is beyond our scope. Nevertheless, two possibilities present themselves: Protestantism’s tendency to ignore anything before Luther and an over-reaction to materialism.

⁷⁵ Rice, “An Exclusive Interview with Master Lyricist Tim Rice”

⁷⁶ Even if *Passion* goes too far towards miaphysitism, that is no longer considered a heresy.

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